

## Strawberry Wildfire Resilience Project

### **Strawberry Wildlife Resilience Project-Initiation Package for Endangered Species Act Consultation**

Plumas National Forest, Feather Ranger District  
875 Mitchell Ave., Oroville, CA 95965  
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#### **I. INTRODUCTION**

This initiation package will review the proposed Strawberry Wildfire Resilience Project (Strawberry Project) in sufficient detail to determine to what extent the proposed action may affect any of the threatened, endangered, or proposed species and designated or proposed critical habitats listed below. In addition, the following information is provided to comply with statutory requirements to use the best scientific and commercial information available when assessing the risks posed to listed and/or proposed species and designated and/or proposed critical habitat by proposed federal actions. This initiation package is prepared in accordance with legal requirements set forth under regulations implementing Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act (50 CFR 402; 16 U.S.C. 1536 (c)).

#### **Threatened, Endangered, Proposed Threatened or Proposed Endangered Species**

The following listed species may be affected by the proposed action:

Sierra Nevada yellow-legged frog (*Rana sierrae*) E

#### **Species not included in consultation package**

The project was entered into the IPaC website on July 17, 2020 (Consultation Code: 08ESMF00-2020-SLI-2385, Event Code: 08ESMF00-2020-E-07377). Delta smelt (*Hypomesus transpacificus*), California red-legged frog (*Rana draytonii*) and Sierra Nevada yellow-legged frog (*Rana sierrae*) were included on the species list obtained from U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration National Marine Fisheries Service but was eliminated from analysis due to lack of species distribution, suitable habitat, and lack of designated critical habitat.

#### **Critical Habitat**

The action areas addressed within this document does not fall within critical habitat for the Sierra Nevada yellow-legged frog. Critical habitat subunit 1D (Slate Creek 6,641 acres) in Plumas and Sierra Counties, California. Critical habitat at the closet point is  $\geq 6$  km and the furthest point is  $\geq 17$  km straight-line distance from occupied (critical) habitat from all project proposed activities (Final Rule Critical Habitat Pages 27-31 August 26, 2016).

#### **II. CONSULTATION TO DATE**

The Plumas National Forest (PNF) has not previously requested informal or formal consultation from FWS on the project. This biological assessment is prepared for appendage to the Programmatic Biological Opinion in Nine Forest Programs on Nine National Forests in the Sierra Nevada of California (FF08ESM00-2014-F-0557).

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### III. DESCRIPTION OF THE PROPOSED ACTION

The PNF proposes mechanical thinning operations on the Feather River Ranger District (FRRD), Butte, Plumas, and Yuba Counties. The area is located west and southwest of La Port and approximately 15 miles northeast of Challenge CA. Figure 1: Diamond Springs Hill T21N, R8E, S 25, 26, 36 Strawberry Station T20N, R8E, S 13, 20, 22, 27; Road 20N04 T19N, R7E, S 1, 12; T 19N, R8E, S 5, 6; T 20N R8E S 32. (USGS 7.5 minute topographic quadrangle maps: American House Strawberry, and Valley Clipper Mills). Project activities will occur on National Forest Systems Lands between 2021 and 2022. There are no permits required for this activity. Elevations in the project area range between 3,500 and 4,800 feet. Annual precipitation ranges between 70-90 inches. Most of the area is comprised of Sierra mixed conifer forest (*Abies concolor*, *Pseudotsuga menziesii*, *Pinus ponderosa*, *Pinus lambertiana*, *Calocedrus decurrens*, *Abies magnifica*, *Quercus kelloggii*, *Arbutus menziesii* and *Notholithocarpus densiflorus*).

The action area are the units which are defined as all areas to be affected directly or indirectly by the proposed action. Several units are within the elevational range of the SNYLF, however the action area is outside of suitable habitat. Onion Creek on the other hand is in the action area however it is not within the elevational range of the SNYLF.

Treatments in the 445 acres are mechanical thinning with biomass removal not including the 3.9 acres (25-meter buffer) at Onion Creek. Mastication, hand cutting and prescribed fire, referred to as service work will occur within the all acres sometime in the future post- implementation of mechanical thinning and bio mass removal activities.

Mechanical thinning will occur in stands that are overstocked, have poor regeneration, have high fuel loading, and or displaying signs of disease. Thinning areas will be subject to biomass removal of trees  $\leq 10''$  diameter at breast height (DBH) and grapple pile. Service work includes the removal of small  $\leq 10''$  DBH size trees or brush by either masticating or hand cutting and prescribed fire.

Fuel reduction activities allowed within the 3.9 acres include the use of loppers or chainsaws for the removal of small  $\leq 10''$  DBH size trees or brush. Piles of brush will be piled and burned outside of the buffer.

#### Conservation Measures

Project Conservation Measures were developed to ensure compliance with Endangered Species Act and USDA Forest Service Region 5 direction. The following Conservation Measures will be followed to avoid or minimize the potential for adverse effects.

- 1) Limited Operating Period (LOP) of October 15th through June 1st, or the first wetting rains (first 0.5 centimeter of autumn rain), will be implemented for all project activities within the 25-meter buffer. In the unlikely event wetting rains should occur during implementation, operations will stop. Work may subsequently resume when rain stops and

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after a dry period of 48 hours or more, and no further precipitation is forecast during time required to complete construction.

- 2) If any new species become listed, or a currently listed species is discovered within the action area, and may be adversely affected by activities, the FS will implement protection measures appropriate for the species, such as LOPs, as recommended by a FS biologist. If these circumstances occur, the Forest Service will request section 7 consultation if needed (i.e., if the proposed activities may affect the species).

### IV. STATUS OF THE SPECIES IN THE ACTION AREA

Distribution-wide species account (life history, spatial ecology, population status, threats) for the Sierra Nevada Yellow-legged frog (SNYLF) are provided in the USDA Forest Service Biological Assessment for the Programmatic Consultation between the Pacific Southwest Region and the Fish and Wildlife Service (Programmatic BA, Pages 31-37, June 16, 2014). There are no meadows in the action area classified as suitable for SNYLF.

Hampshire Creek is a perennial stream 3,400 foot elevation at the units and terminates at 2,000 feet into the Yuba River flowing into Bullard's Bar. There is a 25-meter buffer that is 3.9 acres that was surveyed including 500 feet downstream. Surveys focused on adults, sub adults and tadpoles and included walking the entirety of those areas. Surveys for post-metamorphic individuals focused on the surface of the ground, rocks, or at the water's edge. No frogs were detected.

Onion Creek is a perennial stream near Diamond Springs at 4,500 to 4,400 feet elevation and not in the action area. The distance from the closet unit to Onion Creek is 88-meters and furthest 100-meters. Surveys of Onion Creek consistently have found Foothill yellow-legged frogs (FYLF) (*Rana boylei*) during the last 20-years of surveying efforts.

Critical habitat is > 6 km from the action area and historic surveys (1951, 1960, 1982, and 2002) recorded SNYLF detections in Rabbit Creek (USDA Forest Service NRIS AqS, Natural Resource Manager, and accessed March 2020). Rabbit Creek has been surveyed since over multiple years and SNYLF have not been detected, only Foothill yellow-legged frogs. In the past decade the creeks, tributaries and distributaries have been surveyed in what is now the Strawberry Project. Results of those surveys have found no SNYLFs again only FYLFs.

### V. ENVIRONMENTAL BASELINE AND CUMMULATIVE EFFECTS

#### Direct and Indirect Effects of Proposed Action

##### *Thin forest to meet fuels and forest health objectives (445 acres)*

##### Mechanical thinning (441.1 acres)

##### Service Work (445 acres)

Potential effects from activities associated with vegetation management were outline in the Programmatic BA, as were best management practices (BMPs) and standards and guidelines (S&Gs) (U.S.D.A. Forest Service. 2004) implemented at the project level to reduce negative impacts to individual SNYLFs and habitat (Pages 12-13, 37-48, June 16, 2014). Proposed mechanical thinning will adhere to all BMPs and S&Gs presented in the Programmatic BA.

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(U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2017 Programmatic BA, Pages 37-48). There are potential long-term benefits if proposed fuels and forest health treatments should reduce the risk of future high severity wildfire passing through this landscape.

### **Cumulative Effects**

The existing condition reflects changes on the landscape from all activities that have occurred in the past, and analysis of cumulative effects of the proposed action evaluates the impact of the project on the existing condition within the analysis area. Cumulative effects include the effects of future Federal, State, Tribal, local or private actions that are reasonably certain to occur in the action area. Cumulative effects to SNYLF are not expected to occur as there will be no loss to the quantity and/or quality of habitat. Personal firewood cutting is a permitted ongoing activity in the analysis area along National Forest System Roads. Although project related activities may increase personal firewood cutting in the action area, potential impacts will be negligible given firewood cutting regulations are followed. Recreation activities are considered low within the action area.

The project was designed to reduce fuel loading in the forest and return fire back to the ecosystem. The risk of cumulative effects from the proposed ongoing and future activities will likely be negligible at this time based on the relatively small size of the project area in relation to habitat availability.

### **VI. CONCLUSION - DETERMINATIONS**

The Project will have **No Effect** on *Rana sierrae* because there is no suitable habitat in the action area.

### **VII. LITERATURE CITED**

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2016. Final Rule Critical Habitat for the Sierra Nevada Yellow-Legged Frog, Northern DPS of the Mountain Yellow-legged frog and the Yosemite Toad Federal Register 59046 Vol. 81, No 166

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2014. Amendment of the Programmatic Biological Opinion on Amendment of the Programmatic Biological Opinion on Nine Forest Programs on Nine National Forests in the Sierra Nevada of California for the Endangered Sierra Nevada Yellow-legged Frog, Endangered Northern Distinct Population Segment of the Mountain Yellow-legged Frog, and Threatened Yosemite Toad. FF08ESM00-2014-F-0557  
[https://www.fws.gov/sacramento/es/Survey-Protocols-Guidelines/Documents/USFS\\_SNA\\_pbo.pdf](https://www.fws.gov/sacramento/es/Survey-Protocols-Guidelines/Documents/USFS_SNA_pbo.pdf)

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2014. Endangered and threatened wildlife and plants; Endangered status for the Sierra Nevada yellow-legged frog and the northern district population segment of the mountain yellow-legged frog, and threatened status for the Yosemite toad. Federal Register 79:24256-245310.

U.S.D.A. Forest Service. 2018. Natural Resource Manager. Accessed March 2019 at <http://fsweb.nrm.fs.fed.us/>

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U.S.D.A. Forest Service. 2004. Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment (SNFPA) Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (FSEIS) and Record of Decision (ROD). USDA Forest Service, Pacific Southwest Region. Vallejo, CA. January 2004.

### **VIII. LIST OF CONTACTS/CONTRIBUTORS/PREPARERS**

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Figure 1. Strawberry Project action area suitable habitat assessment 25- meter buffed area from New Hampshire Creek and site clarification for Onion Creek.

